

As the new highly contagious COVID-19 variant spreads throughout the region

# Media promotes the unsafe reopening of Ann Arbor schools and the University of Michigan

Jesse Thomas  
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In the midst of a county-issued stay-at-home recommendation for students at the University of Michigan (UMich)—the second of its kind since the fall—as well as the recent state-mandated shutdown of the school’s Athletics Department, multiple local publications and corporate advocacy groups are aggressively pushing for the resumption of in-person learning as well as non-essential educational services in the Ann Arbor area.

The purpose of the Washtenaw County Health Department’s (WCHD) recommendation, which was issued on January 27, was to “slow the spread of COVID-19, including the more easily transmitted B.1.1.7. variant.” As of Friday, 28 cases of the more contagious B.1.1.7 variant were identified in Washtenaw County and nearby Wayne County. The origin of the spread was traced to individuals associated with the university’s athletic department. An MLive.com report from Sunday confirms that the variant has now also been found in Kent County (Grand Rapids), on the western side of Michigan.

The University of Michigan campus has been the setting of a bitter struggle of students and university workers against the administration over the unsafe reopening of the campus. In September, 2020, graduate student instructors led a 9-day strike against the university’s reopening plans that drew widespread support across the campus and the region. The strike also won sympathy from workers in the region and inspired similar actions throughout the country.

The strike movement was ultimately isolated and snuffed out by the leadership of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) union and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), its parent organization. Cowering in the face of legal threats by the administration, they rammed through a pitiful deal which barely met a mere fraction of the demands that participants demanded.

The university was forced by opposition that continued through the fall to implement mitigation measures, such as reducing on-campus residential capacity as well as mandatory weekly testing. However, months after the strike, the administration’s main priority remains the resumption of

revenue-generating activity at the expense of the safety of the community.

In this effort to reopen schools and businesses in the region, local media and corporate-backed advocacy groups are playing a particularly pernicious role.

A rally was staged in the heart of downtown Ann Arbor last weekend demanding the reopening of local K-12 public schools to in-person learning. The demonstration was organized by a handful of representatives of the private healthcare industry under the banner of a “grassroots” advocacy group called Ann Arbor Reasonable Return (A2R2).

The event, which drew a fairly small crowd of just over 100 participants, featured contributions by Ann Arbor parents, teachers, residents and physicians. The speakers orchestrated group chants from the crowd, including, “Doctors say open our schools!” and “(Michigan Governor Gretchen) Whitmer says open our schools!”

The rally was live-streamed on Facebook and was hosted by Kathy Bishop, who introduced herself as a “concerned Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) parent with a degree in public health.” Bishop has a Masters of Science in Health Administration from the University of Michigan and is the Program Manager of the Michigan Surgical Quality Collaborative (MSQC), a healthcare organization closely associated with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and integrated into the University of Michigan’s hospital department. Also present at the rally was Lena Kaufman, the organizer of the event, Press Officer for A2R2 and a freelance writer and editor who has worked for several private healthcare organizations.

The organization wrote two open letters to the school district on February 7, 2021 and November 8, 2020, which it boasts were signed by hundreds of local doctors and pediatricians.

The letters selectively cite a narrow range of scientific studies and advance the narrative that schools do not conclusively lead to the increased spread of infection, and that children are not susceptible to or significant transmitters of Covid-19. Included

in their citations were news articles referencing the *Journal of the American Medical Association's* (JAMA) study of rural Wisconsin schools, which has been a cornerstone of the corporate and media blitz to push for school reopening.

None of the figures or organizations which have cited the opinion piece published in *JAMA* refer to the disclaimer at the bottom of the article: "The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

Even the Biden administration, which is at the forefront of the drive to reopen schools in the United States, felt compelled to distance itself from the media's rampant misuse of the JAMA report and another study published in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR). In fact, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said at a press conference last week that "the CDC hasn't issued the formal recommendations or requirements on how all schools across the country can open. They did a report, as they do reports frequently, based on an area in Wisconsin," she said, stressing the report had extremely limited applicability to urban areas.

On the contrary, as Director of the CDC and member of the Biden administration coronavirus task force Dr. Michael Osterholm said on January 31, "you and I are sitting on a beach with blue skies and it's 70 degrees. But I see a category five hurricane or higher 450 miles offshore. Telling people to evacuate on that nice blue-sky day is going to be hard. But I can also tell you that a hurricane is coming."

No mention was made, either at last Saturday's rally or on A2R2's website, of the hundreds of thousands who have died due to coronavirus and the tens of millions more infected over the past year. The numerous other studies and warnings by JAMA and the other scientific organizations and publications from which A2R2 cherry-picks their arguments have given the lie to any claim that returning to in-person schooling should be a social priority.

While Bishop took a moment to remind the crowd to wear masks and maintain social distancing, disavowing "COVID deniers," she declared that "we are not asking for every child to go back to the classroom, we are asking for the choice for our children to return."

She did not, however, say whether teachers, staff, students and parents forced back into schools by A2R2's campaign should have the choice to protect themselves from illness and death.

A barrage of articles in the Ann Arbor local news has also recently been published which uncritically echo the false claims promoted in the national media that a return to in-person learning is not only safe, but necessary. The *Michigan Daily*, the student-led campus newspaper, published an article with sympathetic coverage of the A2R2 event, citing the *New York Times'* cynical effort to use student suicides as its justification. It also published a near-endorsement of a petition for the

holding of an in-person graduation ceremony. The petition was created by a UMich School of Public Policy student who was a former employee of the *Daily*.

The Reasonable Return event, as well as the recent onslaught of pro-reopening propaganda, reflects sheer indifference to mass death by middle and upper sections of the business establishment. This is part of a broader push by the US ruling elite to reopen schools in order to force workers back into factories and workplaces.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer, acting in accordance with the Biden administration, issued a recommendation in early January to have schools opened by March 1. These policies and initiatives have not been formed with safety of students and teachers in mind. The priority is profits, both regionally and above all those of Wall Street.

The sharp contrast between the needs of the working-class majority, who stand to lose everything from premature and miscalculated reopenings, and the wealthy minority who require a steady stream of profits, can no more clearly be seen than in Chicago, where 20,000 teachers are currently waging a bitter struggle against move by the school board, in collaboration with the union bureaucrats, to push for in-person learning. Their efforts to wage an independent struggle for their interests have won support across the country and simultaneously earned the ire of capitalist billionaires and their state agents.

The attitude of Ann Arbor workers, youth and students is best expressed by the events of September and the GEO-led strike. "I don't understand how people can feel so comfortable with the idea of reopening, despite the fact that an unknown mutation is already in the community," an undergraduate student who was involved in the strike told the WWS. "It has already been shown how many lives can be saved by lockdowns."

The student also supported the rank-and-file Chicago teachers struggles against the city's local politicians. "Good for them," she said. "Being in-person right now is dangerous."



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